

A Stranger Things Christmas by usa123

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Summary: The Party goes out of their way to ensure El's first Christmas with them is nothing short of perfect.

A Stranger Things Christmas

A/N: I don't think the Party's Christmases are normally this sappy. Since it's El's first Christmas with them, however, they're all going out of their way to make it perfect for her, and that sentimentality is going to bleed into the gifts they got for each other too.

A/N 2: It's my head canon that Eleven is going to go by 'Jane' next season but that Mike is going to still call her 'El'. That's why the name might shift depending on who is speaking. (It only happens a handful of times though, so if you have a different head canon, you should be able to skip right over it.)

Disclaimer: I don't own *Stranger Things*.

"No way."

"You have to."

"Hell. No," Steve repeated, shaking his head emphatically. "I know I've done a lot of dorky things for you guys lately but this is a new low, even for me."

"C'mon Steve," Mike begged from the passenger seat of the Beemer. "It's for El. She's never had a real Christmas before."

Steve opened his mouth to object, closed it again, then scowled at Mike. "That's low, kid."

Mike knew it was, but this was El's first Christmas with the Party and he was determined to make it both perfect and memorable. He didn't know what Hopper had done last year but, if it was anything like their Halloween, Mike had a lot of ground to make up.

Which was why he was in Steve Harrington's car. Mike had shopped around for other options first but his go-tos would already be 1) at the party or 2) out of town; since no one else knew about El's existence yet, Steve was his last and only option. It wasn't that Steve

was a bad guy—he *had* saved Mike from the Shadow Monster's tentacles—but he and Mike weren't nearly as close as Dustin and Steve were, thanks to some residual awkwardness from when Steve and Nancy had dated last year.

For El though, Mike was willing to overcome the chasm of awkwardness. He turned what his mother called his "Bambi eyes" on full force then turned to face Steve. "So will you do it?"

Steve matched his stare evenly, then had the gall to smile. "I'm immune to pleading stares from eight-year-olds," he said after a minute.

Mike cursed then looked down at the gap between the seats as he fumbled in his pocket and pulled out three crumpled bills. "I'll pay you," he muttered, that method having been his absolute final resort. It was only six dollars but that was all he had, since he'd spent the rest of it on gifts for the Party.

A hand closed around his, pushing the bills back toward him. Surprised, Mike glanced up to see Steve looking both disappointed and genuinely offended.

"I'm not going to take your money, Mike. I was in from the moment you said it was for El—I mean, Jane. I just wanted to see how far you'd go."

Mike briefly considered hitting Steve over the head with the bag in the footwell for making him sweat but decided that it was mission incompatible to have Steve show up on Saturday with a black eye. "Everything you need is in the bag," was all he said, pointing to it with one hand while the other shoved bills back into his pocket. "It's Mr. Clarke's so it should fit."

Steve nodded, then stared expectantly at Mike.

"Am I forgetting something?" the eighth-grader asked, mentally running through the list of stuff he needed for the big day.

"Yes. Getting out of my car."

Apparently they hadn't closed the chasm as much as Mike would

have liked. Still, it was better than nothing.

He nodded, then quickly clambered out of the BMW. "Four fifteen Saturday. Don't be late," he called rather unnecessarily, since he knew that, for El, Steve would show up both on time and dressed in the get-up Mike had secured for him.

Old habits, he supposed, as he unlocked his bike and headed home.

Mike wasn't the only one worried about El's first Christmas with the Party. Once the fallout from That Night had died down, Hopper was battling with a new slew of concerns, ranging from the serious (navigating his new relationship with Jane and making sure she was ready to start school the next fall) to the more mundane (showing her how the holidays were really celebrated). He'd tried his best over the past year, and had been successful for some of the more commercial ones, even going so far as to have her pick a birthday for herself, but Easter had been a pretty horrible flop (no pun intended). Jane had been a trooper through all of it, even though she didn't always agree with staying inside or not celebrating like she'd seen on television... which had led to the blow-up over Halloween.

Now that her survival was known to the rest of the Party, Hopper was determined to show her what family-centric holidays were truly about. The only problem was work. In years past, he was on-duty for the major holidays in order to give Powell and Callahan time with their families so it would have drawn suspicion if he had asked for it off now. Thankfully Joyce had stepped up for Thanksgiving and included Jane in their celebration, with Hopper managing to close a case early enough to get there for the actual dinner. It tasted as great as it looked and it was only afterwards that Hopper overheard Will and Jonathan whispering about how some pre-made meals had mysteriously shown up on the doorstep at one thirty, enough for all five of them.

Christmas was a bit trickier, as there was the whole Santa Claus thing to deal with. It didn't surprise Hopper that Jane'd never heard of it until she'd seen it on television. Unfortunately, that left him with the difficult decision of letting her believe the myth or telling her the truth right away. While he wanted nothing more than for her to have

at least one Christmas of magic to make up for all the ones she'd missed, he knew she'd be devastated next summer when he'd have to reveal the truth before she could get teased in high school. So, Hopper had opted to explain the whole thing to her upfront but made sure to mention how they could be Santas for others even if they didn't believe themselves, thus keeping the magic of the myth alive. Understandably, Jane had been a little sad but had quickly warmed to the idea of giving gifts to her friends.

Then there was the matter of celebrating Christmas with her friends. Since Jane's existence still wasn't public information, the party would have to be here or at the Byers on a day that wasn't Christmas itself, so her friends could celebrate with their nuclear families. Jane had immediately chosen the cabin, excited to see it decorated, and, after reviewing Hopper's schedule, they'd collectively decided on the Saturday before Christmas.

It had been years since Hopper had actually celebrated Christmas so he deferred all of the decorating to Jane who based their theme off of all the Christmas specials that had been on for the last week. When they were all done, the cabin looked more festive than Hopper had ever remembered it being, even when his grandfather had still been alive. While the sight tugged at some particularly painful memories, they were evened out by the look of wonder on Jane's face each time she plugged in the tree.

Saturday was here before they knew it. The Byers showed up over just after lunch to help prepare the food and do any last-minute cleaning...and to give Jane an absolutely beautiful dress for an early Christmas present. Jane's jaw had practically hit the floor and she'd wanted to put on right away, but Hopper had insisted she wait until after they were done making the food so as not to get it dirty. Jane had just nodded and hung the dress up in her doorway, so it was visible no matter where she was standing in the cabin.

Between Hopper, Jane and Will, they'd managed to season a roast and get it into the oven without too much difficulty; it was an old recipe of Flo's, which she had assured Hopper was idiot-proof. Vegetables were then chopped for a salad and cans of corn opened to be heated up closer to dinner itself. They had been told not to bother with the potatoes, for the Wheelers would be bringing a large pot of

their mother's recipe. While they worked, Jonathan and Joyce arranged the card tables Hopper had secured from the office into as large of a table as the cabin could manage and taped down the red plastic cloth.

With all that done, there was nothing to do but put on a Christmas movie and wait for the Party to arrive.

Not surprisingly, the kids showed up way before four, various snacks and gifts in tow. The snacks were dropped onto the table and, while Jane was distracted playing hostess and taking coats, one gift from each party member found its way into a small red bag tucked away behind the tub, which would make its way out to the porch after the Byers and Nancy had arrived. If Hopper had noticed, he would have said something, as there was only one real conclusion as to where that was going, but, as is, he was too busy making sure everything else was going to plan to pay much attention to the admittedly very subtle motions.

By four, the party was in full swing, with kids chattering over the old-fashioned Christmas songs playing in the background.

At 4:11, Jonathan announced the roast was done and, while Hopper began to carve, Jane took this as her cue to begin handing out plates.

"Where is Steve?" she asked Dustin as she handed him the second-to-last plate.

"He'll be here, don't you worry," Dustin replied a touch too quickly, earning him a sharp elbow in his side from Max.

Dustin doubled over in pain but quickly straightened up and threw an excessively wide smile on his face when he realized Jane was squinting at him and Max, obviously trying to figure out what was going on. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Max smiling too, but her expression looked almost pained.

Finally, Jane just nodded and put the unclaimed plate on the table beside her. "We'll save him a piece."

"You look really pretty in that dress, Jane," Max then said as Dustin breathed a sigh of relief beside her. Internally she was grimacing since that was probably the girliest thing she'd said this year but it was worth it to see Jane's reaction.

The girl in question absolutely beamed and spun in a circle to show how the skirt poofed. "It's from Joyce. And it has pockets." Then Jane poked at Max's bun and grinned widely when the red hair stayed in place. "I like that a lot."

"You shouldn't. My hair's pulled back so tight my forehead actually hurts." Before Dustin could elbow her in return, Max quickly added, "But thank you."

"We'll ask Nancy," Jane proclaimed with a soft smile, grabbing Max's arm and tugging her out of line. "Or Joyce. One of them can fix it."

Their master plan was interrupted by Hopper announcing they were ready to eat and Joyce motioning for the kids to go through the buffet line first.

"We'll get it later," Max said, not wanting to derail the plans for The Perfect Christmas. Jane nodded, then headed off to grab a plate for herself.

As soon as she was out of earshot, Dustin leaned over to talk to Mike. "You did tell Hopper Steve was—"

But it was too late. The door burst open and the teenager, wearing a full Santa suit complete with long white beard and artificially enlarged gut, burst through the door. "Ho, ho, ho," he bellowed, swinging a large red bag over his shoulder.

While the rest of the Party tried to hide their sniggers for Jane's sake, Mike turned to watch his girlfriend's reaction.

"Hi Steve," was all she said before getting in line behind Max.

Steve's face turned an alarming shade of red and he immediately dropped the bag. "I told you this was a stupid idea, Wheeler," he said, reaching down the front of his suit, pulling out the pillows belted to his waist, and chucking them non-too-gently at the Party. "She's

psychic for Christ's sakes."

Mike was taken aback by the whole situation and was struggling to make his mouth form the words to ask Jane about her utter lack of a reaction. "But you said you believed," he finally stuttered.

"You asked if I *knew* about Santa," she countered, grabbing a napkin-wrapped set of utensils from the counter. "Not if I believed." A split second later, she straightened up sharply and whirled around to face Mike, her eyes widening to the size of saucers. "Was that wrong?" she whispered, her voice low.

Someone—Hopper—cleared their throat loudly from the other side of the room, but Mike was already on it, shaking his head fervently from side to side, while forcing the stunned expression from his face. "No, no, not at all. I should have been more clear."

Without warning, Jane leaned forward and kissed him on the mouth. "Thank you for trying," she said, resting her forehead against his.

This time, someone else cleared their throat, ruining Jane and Mike's moment. They looked up to see Steve pointing at the bag of gifts drooping on the ground.

"Since the cat's out of the bag, these are for you, Jane. From your friends, not from Santa, since you don't believe." Steve spun around and sloppily saluted Mike. "Wheeler, my job here is done. Merry Christmas to all," Steve tipped the Santa hat as best he could at the rest of the Party then spun around to face the door, "and I'll see you next year."

He had just pulled open the door when it slammed itself closed. Steve slowly looked over his shoulder, his expression matching the one Jane had worn a moment ago.

"Stay please," Jane said, sniffing back the impending trickle of blood before it ruined the small bit of makeup she'd been allowed to wear.

"Yeah," Dustin chimed in as he abandoned his place in line to walk over to where Steve was standing. "You were invited before the whole Santa thing."

"I thought the two were related," Steve admitted to Dustin, who just shook his head.

Before anyone else could speak, Joyce grabbed the last plate off the table and handed it to Steve. "You're staying," she announced, then grabbed his sleeve and pulled him further into the room.

Looking a little stunned himself, Steve allowed himself to be pushed into line before Hopper and Joyce.

"Hi Chief," he said uneasily.

"Harrington," Hopper replied levelly.

The senior nodded then whipped around to face forward in line. As the kids started getting their food, Steve tucked the plate under his arm and pulled off the Santa hat and facial hair, tossing them toward the doorway. While the hair crashed to the ground at the baseboards, the hat stopped in midair and floated back to Steve, where it dropped on his head.

"Leave it," Jane said, from the middle of the room, where she'd come to stand by the bag of gifts. "It's festive."

Steve scowled, cursed, then readjusted the hat on his head. "Can I at least take off the boots? Either they belong to Mrs. Clarke or Mr. Clark has elf feet but they're way too small."

Jane nodded then looked over at Hopper. "Do I have to wait until Christmas?"

The Party was quick to voice their opinion (of "no", big surprise) when Hopper shook his head. "No, but can we eat first?"

Jane considered this for a minute then nodded. "Eat fast," the adults heard her hiss to her friends as they made their way through the line.

Despite the speed at which the food was inhaled, all the kids took time to comment about how good it was—mostly with surprise, but Hopper supposed that was par for the course. By the time he'd sat down, most of the kids were done and the high-schoolers weren't far

behind, having been coerced by the kids to speed it up. Feeling Jane's gaze, Hopper painstakingly cut his roast into bite-sized pieces, then put down his utensils took a slow swing of his water.

Then he looked up at Jane, who was shaking her head sadly at him. "Well, go on," he said with a grin. "Joyce and I are fine eating alone."

Jane jerked away from the table and had hugged Hopper almost before he'd registered the fact that her chair had moved. "Thank you," she said, yanking open the drawstring on the bag as she dropped to the ground beside it. She immediately began pulling out her packages, only pausing briefly to point to the tree set-up to the right of the television. "There are presents for all of you," she said, before her head disappeared into the bag.

The rest of the kids took this as their cue to hurry over to the tree and start handing out their own presents.

Sans Jane, each of the Party had exactly one gift under the tree, which had been collectively purchased by the other members. This method had come about when Mrs. Sinclair had stumbled upon a list of Lucas' totaling just how much he was planning on spending this Christmas. While it was well-intentioned, it was far too much for each of the kids. The Party had been less than thrilled until Joyce had commented that if they each wanted to get Jane a little something extra, since this was her first real Christmas with all of them, that that was technically acceptable.

Besides, they would all have presents from their own families to open on Christmas itself.

The ground disappeared in a whoosh of wrapping paper and the Party began "oooh-ing" and "aahing" at their various gifts, ranging from drawing supplies to SuperComms.

Upon receiving his, Steve had definitely not teared up, insisting to this day that something had aggravated his eyes. The rest of the Party knew better and Jonathan took advantage of the moment to snap a picture. When Steve didn't threaten bodily harm if that picture saw the light of day, it was obvious just how surprised he was to have been included in the gift giving.

"It was above the limit," he protested, all the while staring at the walkie in disbelief.

"We helped a little," Nancy spoke up, motioning to her and Jonathan.

Steve's confused gaze rose to them and his jaw worked a couple times like he was going to object. Finally, he just nodded. "Thanks."

Then he turned back to the kids. "Didn't anyone give Nancy and Jonathan their gifts?"

"No!" the kids exclaimed in chorus, too engrossed in their own gifts to make a move.

Steve grumbled as he rose to his feet and retrieved two of the remaining gifts. "Ho ho ho," he deadpanned, handing them to Nancy and Jonathan.

"You guys didn't need to get us anything," Jonathan said, though he was quick to tear the paper off his new pack of blank tapes for his video recorder. Nancy had also gotten a pack of shooting targets—thankfully blank and not with monsters printed on them—and a pack of brightly-colored scrunchies. While Nancy was thankful for the effort, she couldn't help but feel it was a rather non-specific gift, in comparison to Jonathan's and Steve's.

That changed when Mike spoke up from the other side of the room. "I know how you hate girls in movies fighting with their hair down," he said with a shrug. "Now you can be prepared."

As if on cue, Max held up the pack of scrunchies she'd received along with her own SuperComm. Nancy spared her a quick glance before walking over and pulling her brother into a hug, ignoring the fact he'd tried to squirm away from her. Things had been a little strained over the last year, despite their oath to not keep secrets, but this gift showed that he still was making an effort to stay connected.

"You're embarrassing me," Mike hissed but Nancy just shrugged and held on tighter, mostly to annoy him.

"A real army helmet!" Lucas cried, startling them all.

Mike took advantage of this interruption to free himself from Nancy's grip and scoot between Eleven and the tree, where his sister couldn't reach him again. He shot Nancy a warning glare before returning his attention to El.

The gifts she'd already opened ran the gambit from stuff for her locker at school next year to a license plate for the bike she was sure to be getting "from Santa". Mike heard a series of muffled grunts in the background but didn't look up since El was just getting to his present.

"From you," she stated, reading the tag. Mike nodded, his heart banging against his ribs as he wondered for the millionth time if this had been the right idea. He needn't have worried. El's face lit up at the small bracelet Mike had given her with a single snowflake charm.

"Do you like—" Mike began but trailed off when El crashed into him, hugging him tightly.

"I love it," she said when she pulled away. She immediately held out her wrist, shaking it once in a signal for Mike to put the bracelet on her. Once he'd done so, she stared at it on her wrist then smiled softly. "Thank you."

By that time, everyone was done opening gifts of their own and were watching El continue through her pile, so Mike refrained from initiating a kiss, knowing his footing with the Chief was uneasy on the best of days. He saved it for later, knowing he'd be able to steal one as they said goodbye, when Hopper was otherwise occupied.

He then turned to his own present, which he'd only partially unwrapped before Nancy had attacked him. It turned out to be a D&D accessory kit, which he eagerly tore open and began paging through.

"What did you get honey?" he heard Joyce ask, to which Will held up the pack of crayons and a few sheets of thicker artist's paper.

"When we start watercolors at school," Lucas had explained before collapsing under Will's attack hug.

It was at this point that Nancy realized Dustin was the only one who hadn't shared what he'd received. She kicked at Steve's chair, smiling internally when he grabbed onto the seat like it was going to fall apart, then tilted her head at Dustin, who was unusually silent.

"What about you, Dustin?" Steve asked, leaning over the curly-haired kid's shoulder.

Wordlessly, Dustin held up a dog tag shaped like a bone that had the name "Dart" messily etched in it, obviously by a non-professional hand, and a stack of quarters taped together.

"Even though Dart was a demo-dog and tried to kill Steve, he did let us through in the end and we know he meant a lot to you," Max said. "So you should have something to remember him by."

"The quarters are cos yours was less than everyone else's," Will chimed in.

Dustin looked at his friends, eyes watering and chin wobbling.

Jane pushed aside her gifts and stood up. "He needs a hug," she announced and the rest of the Party quickly scrambled over with her, wrapping each other in a tight group hug.

Nancy was about to nudge Jonathan but he already had his camera up and was snapping pictures as fast as he could wind.

Joyce waited until the snuffles had died down before asking, "Who wants dessert?" The kids were on their feet in an instant, practically tackling each other to get in line for (store-bought) pies and ice cream.

In that moment, elbowing her friends out of her way to keep her spot in line, Jane was happier than she'd ever thought she would be. Later, after everyone left, she opened the journal she'd gotten from Nancy and had recorded how wonderful the day was, start to finish, in as much detail as she could manage, so she could always remember her first real Christmas in Hawkins.